

BERLINALE 2021 Competition

Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige • Directors of *Memory Box*

“Our character feels her mother's secrets – kids can do that”

by MARTA BAŁAGA

01/03/2021 - BERLINALE 2021: Shown in the Golden Bear competition, this film puts paid to Cher's claim that you can't turn back time



(© Joreige/Hadjithomas)

On Christmas Eve in Montreal, teenager Alex (**Paloma Vauthier**) gets her hands on a box full of her mum's old journals and photos, given to a close friend when she left Lebanon. But the mother doesn't want to talk about her past with her daughter, even if it could bring them a bit closer. We talked to directors **Joana Hadjithomas** and **Khalil Joreige** about *Memory Box* [+], screening in competition at the 2021 Berlinale.

Cineuropa: Seeing a girl “discovering” her mother as a teenager makes one realise that we tend to forget that our parents had a life before us, so to speak.

Joana Hadjithomas: This film is based on the notebooks and tapes I would send to my friend who had to leave Beirut. I stayed, and we wrote to each other every day for six years. Then we lost touch, and when we met again 25 years later, we exchanged these notebooks. You always rewrite your own history. You keep some memories, while others you just forget. But I couldn't lie to myself when I was reading these diaries or listening to my own voice. It's also about your dreams – what have you done with them? Who have you become? This question can be very moving. Our daughter wanted to read them, and the first impulse was: “Please do! You will finally understand that your mother is an actual person.” Then we thought that maybe it's not the best idea.

Khalil Joreige: Because we read them! And we noticed that what Joana remembered was very different from what she wrote. She doesn't know Lebanon – and I am not talking about my own daughter here, but about Alex in the film. She doesn't share the same references, so she builds a different image of her mother and these events. Also, when we talk about the war, and we lived through it, it's not the same for someone who can only imagine it or who saw it on a screen.

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Either way, Alex becomes hooked. She also has her own “memory box” – it’s her phone, and she uses these old photos a new life.

JH: Yes, she animates them, for example. We thought about how to represent a certain period, country or situation with just some photos, letters and sounds. This was the most exciting part. Later, when Alex has more material, she is able to reconstruct what her mother's house looked like and how these people were. We didn't want to work with special effects, but with something that could have come from her own mind.

KJ: My archive, as a photographer, consists of 50,000 images. My daughter took more than that on Snapchat in less than six months. It's an archive, too, and it's a diary. We are not nostalgic about “old images”; we are curious about how they change our relationship with the body, the public and storytelling in general.

JH: We were, in a way, connecting up the history of photography: all these old cameras and today's technologies. It was also interesting to reconsider, visually, how to tell a story. There is a part where Alex is reinventing her mother's teenage years, but then she takes charge again, with a more traditional flashback. We liked that confrontation.

Alex enjoys finding out about the things they share – even the fact that her mother, Maia, also used to photograph her tights. But you seem to suggest there is no real communication until she truly opens up.

JH: Maia has changed so much since moving to Montreal; she worked, and she forgot her past. There is a rupture in this woman, and her daughter, by asking questions, forces her to open this box: to confront her past and her souvenirs. It may be painful, but she feels her mother is not fully present – this is her motivation to read and to understand more. She *feels* her mother's secrets – kids can do that.

KJ: She feels the mystery, so she starts digging, and she excavates things. Like this divide between who her mother was and who she is now, even just in terms of her energy. She seems a bit distant now – before, she was more passionate. She starts to wonder: what happened?

JH: She develops compassion for her mother this way, and we wanted to show that moment. Also because it can be very strange. We were living through it with our own daughter, so the film was a way to survive it! When you escape civil war, all you want to do is love, dream, be alive. But it's important to talk about these things because I know for a fact that the people closest to you always know when you are hiding something. It's just there, all the time.

KJ: It becomes a ghost. That's what's so great about cinema – you can deal with things that you don't speak about or don't see. It's all about sensations. We noticed that people who “reconfigure” themselves like Maia are happy just to be able to function. They don't want to take risks by summoning up some old demons.

JH: Maia is a ghost to herself. I know women and men like that. There is always something standing in the way of really connecting with another person. Alex tells her mother: “We don't share anything.” But Maia's generation doesn't talk – they had to adapt. She is still in survival mode. Alex asks questions because she isn't afraid and she doesn't feel like a stranger in that country. When you do, you try to hide a little.

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